

Filipino Kidney Donor Denied US Visa

Feb. 17, 2004

Agence France-Presse

CHICAGO -- A Chicago man had his hopes for a desperately-needed kidney transplant dashed when US authorities denied his Filipino cousin, a potential donor, a visa to travel to the United States.

Erich Monzon was diagnosed with lupus, a debilitating auto-immune disease that attacks the internal organs, when he was 16.

In 2000, he began dialysis treatments to filter his blood and a year later he was put on a waiting list for a donor kidney, but his rare blood type complicated the task of finding a good match, according to his doctors at the University of Illinois (UIC) Medical Center.

So Monzon's father turned to his relatives back home in the Philippines in search of a potential donor.

Blood tests showed Monzon's cousin, Ben Liggayu, was the best match, with the same AB blood type.

"He is a match as good as a brother," said Enrico Benedetti, UIC's chief of transplant surgery.

Liggayu applied for a visitor's visa to travel to the United States for the operation that could improve Monzon's life and wean him off the dialysis machine that he is hooked up to 12 hours a day.

But US embassy officials in the Philippines capital Manila refused the 44-year-old farmer a visa, fearing he might overstay his visit.

The 44-year-old father-of-four "failed to demonstrate that he has sufficiently strong familial, economic or professional ties that would cause his return after a temporary stay in the United States," embassy officials explained in a letter to an Illinois lawmaker who intervened to press Monzon's case.

"Although Mr. Liggayu works as a farmer, his monthly income is very modest. He has fairly small savings and no assets."

Jan Schakowsky, a US Representative for Illinois who counts Monzon among her constituents, has written back to embassy officials, asking them to reconsider their decision.

"Erich is in dire need of a kidney transplant but no other suitable kidney donors have been found in the United States," she wrote. "Since his cousin is of a compatible blood type, it is of great importance that Mr. Liggayu be permitted to enter the States for further testing."

Monzon's doctors say that he could spend several more years on the waiting list if his cousin is refused permission to enter the United States. As it is, his disease has severely compromised his quality of life.

The 24-year-old struggled through undergraduate studies, but is not well enough to pursue a law degree as he had hoped.

"We remain ready to do the transplant," said Benedetti. "This is a young man who deserves a right to a better life."

Benedetti expressed surprise at the decision, which he said was unusual in his experience.

"We've had donors from the Philippines, the Far East and the Middle East come here before."

"I think the difference is September 11," he said, referring to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, and the ensuing crackdown on foreign visitors.

"There is a lot more scrutiny now. Erich is being penalized because of that," the doctor opined.